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Abstract

This paper addresses the social, cultural, and political forces within urban education that relate to teaching students of color. While the education problem in urban communities is a blend of social, cultural, and political factors, transforming pedagogical practices can present viable solutions to the disparities facing inner-city schools. Rather than devalue students' racial and cultural experiences, teachers can activate students' critical consciousness and integrate their cultural backgrounds into the content of their learning experiences. This builds student engagement and counters the phenomenon of student resistance and oppositional culture seen in urban settings. This paper fundamentally argues that urban public school teachers can become social agents. However, current data on the urban teaching workforce suggest that urban teachers are becoming increasingly young, inexperienced, and frustrated with inner-city school working conditions. Therefore, in order for critical pedagogy to be realized, other structural factors surrounding teacher effectiveness and teacher quality must also be addressed.

Keywords

urban education, education reform, critical pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, teacher effectiveness, teacher quality, students of color, racial equity, educational equity

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Critical Pedagogy: Teaching For Social Justice in Inner-City Classrooms

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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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Abstract

This paper addresses the social, cultural, and political forces within urban education that relate to teaching students of color. While the education problem in urban communities is a blend of social, cultural, and political factors, transforming pedagogical practices can present viable solutions to the disparities facing inner-city schools. Through critical pedagogy, teachers can activate students' critical consciousness and integrate their cultural backgrounds into the content of their learning experiences. Rather than devalue students' racial and cultural experiences, teachers should appreciate and acknowledge their identities. This builds student engagement and counters the phenomenon of student resistance and oppositional culture seen in urban settings. This paper fundamentally argues that urban public school teachers can become social agents. However, current data on the urban teaching workforce suggest that urban teachers are becoming increasingly young, inexperienced, and frustrated with inner-city school working conditions. Therefore, in order for critical pedagogy to be realized, other structural factors surrounding teacher effectiveness and teacher quality must also be addressed.

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Section One: Introduction

This paper begins by addressing the structural disparities afflicting American urban public schools, especially those serving in low-income and high-minority communities. It then addresses the contributing socio-political factors, but later focuses on the pedagogical problem and its relationship to lack of student engagement and academic achievement among at-risk students. Critical pedagogy presents itself as a viable solution for confronting these problems in urban education, for new instructional practices must be introduced in inner-city schools to revitalize student engagement and critical learning. The section then concludes with an outline of the paper's argument for using critical pedagogy to create mobility and social change within inner-city schools.

The Issue at Hand

Research continually shows that American urban public schools are facing serious disparities and inequality.¹ Additionally, educational disparities in standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, college matriculation rates, etc. continue to be stratified along class and racial lines. Inner-city schools are also experiencing a decrease in white students and an increased concentration of nonwhite youth. Low-performing schools tend to be low-income and high-minority schools, and many of them fail to produce the mobility necessary for disadvantaged populations to improve their social and economic conditions. It is no surprise then that minority students are more likely to experience lower-class socioeconomic conditions during adulthood (e.g., prison, unemployment, service labor).²

¹ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 7.

² Ibid.

Current education reform efforts have attempted to solve this issue by identifying the most pressing problems in underperforming schools. Some educational scholars believe the problem lies in funding and budget equity. On the other hand, some have argued that the issue is merely organizational, and the solution lies in reforming schools' bureaucratic structure and the authority of administrators. Other arguments have also emphasized the socio-political and socio-cultural context; they contend the problem in urban education cannot be resolved if other structural factors (i.e., poverty, hunger, crime, homelessness) are not also addressed.³

While all of these arguments, and more, present valid reasons for the problems within the education system, the focus of this paper's analysis will primarily be on pedagogy. If effective teachers have been shown to impact at-risk students, in spite of the poor social and economic conditions these youth face, then education reformers should examine which pedagogical techniques successfully reach and engage at-risk student populations.⁴

One of the biggest challenges facing urban school reformers is the development of instructional practices that encourage students to remain invested in schools, for high drop-out rates continue to plague inner-city communities. Furthermore, in urban settings, instruction should be more than identifying the academic needs of disadvantaged students; it should also address the socio-cultural and racial conflicts these youth face and bring into the classroom. Unfortunately, current teaching practices do not address underprivileged schools' racial and cultural context.⁵

Critical pedagogy presents itself as one possible solution to this dilemma. Through critical pedagogy, teachers in urban schools can engage their students by encouraging them to

³ Labaree, D. F. (2004). *The trouble with ed schools*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 11.

⁴ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 17.

⁵ Ibid.

use their own cultural knowledge and experiences to guide the curriculum content. Teachers can also activate students' critical literacy by teaching them to become socially aware of the issues in their communities.⁶

However, while critical pedagogy highlights the importance for teachers to empower students around issues of social justice, the theory misses one important layer in the context of urban education. As noted earlier, inner-city schools are growing increasingly concentrated with minority youth. Thus, critical pedagogy should also acknowledge and affirm students' racial identities and allow learning to be culturally relevant. When students feel personally connected to the learning material, they have a renewed sense of purpose in their education.⁷

It is important to note that critical pedagogy does not aim to entirely replace current curriculum standards, and it does not run counter to the conventional wisdom that the purpose of instruction should be academic achievement. Rather, it argues that the unique lives and conditions of urban youth require an education system that accomplishes two goals: access to quality instruction for academic success, and the preparation to confront the conditions of social and economic inequity in students' daily lives.⁸

Overview

Overall, this paper explores how critical pedagogy can be used as an instrument of social justice in inner-city classrooms. Section Two begins by investigating the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy; it largely draws upon Karl Marx's theory of economic determinism and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Critical pedagogy lies on the philosophical premise

⁶ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman, 109.

⁷ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 11.

⁸ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 4.

that schools are more than just institutions of academic learning; they are socializing mechanisms that currently reflect the cultural values of the middle and upper class.⁹

Section Three further explores this idea through the theory of social reproduction, which illustrates how schools can systematically reproduce inequalities through administrative and instructional practices. Low-income schools do not develop students as intellectual learners; rather, they only teach them the skills necessary for fulfilling lower-class positions. These schools also systematically de-legitimize students' cultures and identities. This, however, can create an oppositional culture, as seen through student resistance and high school drop-out rates.¹⁰ Collectively, these conditions make low-income schools socially immobile; students are less likely to reach a high level of educational attainment and can only resort to lower-class working positions.¹¹

Section Four then presents critical pedagogy's goals in addressing these conflicts. The paradox of critical pedagogy is that it frames the school as both a site of perpetuating inequality and as an institution of social change. However, it can only become the latter if teachers become social agents who develop their students' critical literacy and empower them around issues of social justice.¹²

Section Five highlights one missing component in critical pedagogy theory, however, which is the relevance of racial identity among inner-city students. This section describes how the historical devaluation of racial identity has also contributed to the lack of student engagement in inner-city schools. As a case example, it traces the historical neglect of African American education in public classrooms and illustrates its negative effect on black students' identity

⁹ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman, 56-58.

¹⁰ Ibid. 87-90.

¹¹ Ibid. 74-77.

¹² Ibid. 22.

development. This shows that teachers must not only utilize critical pedagogy to empower students around issues of social justice, but they must also integrate the students' racial backgrounds into the curriculum so that students find learning culturally relevant and meaningful. When critical pedagogues take into account the racial and socio-cultural context of the urban school experience, this then becomes *culturally relevant pedagogy*.¹³

Section Six demonstrates how the theory of critical pedagogy would look in practice if it were implemented in urban classrooms. Drawing on the works of one of the original authors of culturally relevant pedagogy, Ernest Morrell, it provides an educational framework for how critical pedagogy can positively affect students' learning experiences.¹⁴

Although the ideals of culturally relevant pedagogy are hopeful, Section Seven will discuss the challenges to wide-scale implementation. For instance, the standards-driven climate in public education puts into question the feasibility of culturally relevant pedagogy, for the critical method is rooted in customizing curriculum to students' individual and social needs. This does not perfectly align with the principles of standards-based curriculum. Also, the influx of inexperienced teachers in inner-city school classrooms, along with high teacher turnover rates, creates an instable school environment for critical learning. Teacher quality is foundational for the success of critical pedagogy, but research shows that many teachers have not yet reached a level of effective instruction to meet the demands of culturally relevant pedagogy. In order for critical pedagogy to be effectively implemented, new policy measures must also address the structural barriers to teacher quality and teacher effectiveness in inner-city schools.¹⁵

¹³ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

¹⁴ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang.

¹⁵ Ingersoll, R. (2013). *Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force*. Retrieved from The Consortium for Policy Research in Education website: <http://cpre.org/seven-trends-transformation-teaching-force-0>

Section Eight concludes by providing a brief summary of the paper and re-emphasizing the need to transform pedagogical practices, reengage urban youth, and create mobility within public education. Since culturally relevant pedagogy is a relatively new theory, Section Eight also suggests areas of future research. This includes analyzing the long-term outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogy and its potential impact on teacher effectiveness.

Overall, the urban education crisis requires a transformative solution. Students in disadvantaged classrooms, who are mostly low-income students of color, have been denied their right to fair and quality education.¹⁶ Their educational outcomes have mirrored the immobility and poor social conditions they face within their neighborhood communities. Critical pedagogy brings hope to this cycle of disparity by reassessing the goal of urban teaching. The recognition of the conditions of inequality and the desire to overturn these conditions should be the starting point for the urban educator and for the urban student.¹⁷

Critical pedagogy also demonstrates how pedagogy can be its own social movement in “teaching for America.” If education should fulfill its ideal purpose of being a public good, where all students can enjoy its benefits regardless of their race or socioeconomic circumstance, then schools should create opportunities for social mobility and change for those who need it most. Under the guidance of critical pedagogy, the idea of teaching for social justice and for a better America appears promising.

Section Two: Theoretical Foundations of Critical Pedagogy

¹⁶ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 5.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Before understanding the role critical pedagogy may play in creating opportunities for social mobility, this section first explains the theory's philosophical foundations. Critical pedagogy draws heavily from the works of Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizing the role class and culture play in the schooling process. Critical pedagogues believe education is both a political and cultural affair. They argue that since power relations control the schooling process, in order for critical pedagogy to take place, these current power dynamics must be challenged.¹⁸

Class and Culture

In critical education theory, class and culture are inextricably linked. Class refers to the economic, social, and political relationships that govern life in a social order.¹⁹ These relationships will largely be defined by individuals' income level, occupation, and place of residence. These relations also create asymmetrical distribution of power, which results in social stratification. This paper will specifically focus on those who are positioned at the bottom of the American social hierarchy, also known as the lower class. While this refers more generally to the unemployed, underemployed, and marginalized economic groups, they have also historically consisted of largely non-white and minority populations.²⁰

In addition, critical pedagogues define culture as a common system of beliefs, attitudes, practices, ideologies, and values shared by a social collective.²¹ This shared culture functions as a means of organizing and sustaining social order. Class relations significantly contribute to the way culture is produced in a society, as one's preferred culture is largely related to the individual's position within the given social structure. Furthermore, the degree to which a culture

¹⁸ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 136.

¹⁹ Ibid. 171-172.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

is legitimized in greater society is largely determined by the group's collective power, which is derived from social status and rank.²²

Culture is found in many social symbols and practices, such as music, dress, food, speech, religion, and education. Television, video, and films are also popularly regarded as cultural forms, but critical pedagogues contend schooling is another major form of cultural expression. Furthermore, while culture may be observed as individual behaviors, these actions do not exist separately from social structures and relations of class, race, and gender. In the urban context, inner-city students carry sub-cultures largely reflective of their socioeconomic status, race, and gender. However, upon entering school, these cultures clash with mainstream public schooling, which largely reflects the cultural values of the middle and upper class.²³

Ideology & Hegemony

Inspired by Louis Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus, critical pedagogues place great emphasis on the role of ideology in schools.²⁴ Ideology can be defined as the "production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups."²⁵ Critical pedagogues contend that schools primarily function as sites of cultural programming, where students are acculturated into mainstream ideologies and values. In other words, schools are socializing agents of the state.²⁶

Hegemony, domination, and power are also repeatedly mentioned in critical pedagogy discourse. Hegemony is defined as the exercise of domination by the culture in power over

²² McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 159.

²³ Ibid. 168.

²⁴ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 4.

²⁵ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 171-172.

²⁶ Ibid.

subordinate cultures.²⁷ According to this definition, it is quite easy to consider all forms of hegemony as oppressive, yet critical educational theorists do not believe it is entirely negative; certain prevailing values of the dominant class have created positive social relations (e.g., individual rights and freedom). Yet, what is of importance for the critical pedagogue is isolating those hegemonic values that are oppressive, for they are the ones that perpetuate the status quo of inequity.²⁸

Additionally, subordinate classes can unknowingly participate in hegemony through the creation of oppositional cultures. One popular example of oppositional culture in American cities is “street gang” culture, which contests the mainstream norms of education, speech, music, and dress. Although oppositional cultures originate to resist the values and practices of the dominant class, there is still a degree of consent and acknowledgement that the mainstream culture is in the greatest position of power.²⁹

The Social Construction of Knowledge

Critical pedagogues believe all forms of knowledge are socially constructed.³⁰ There is no absolute truth, as this will always be relative and dependent on culture and context. All individuals, regardless of class or status, will carry their own subjectivities and possess different constructed forms of knowledge. However, some may have more power and legitimacy than others. Critical pedagogues argue that schools are not only a battleground for competing cultures but also a battle between competing forms of knowledge, and the lower class tends to be on the

²⁷ Apple, M. W. (1999). *Power, meaning, and identity: Essays in critical educational studies*. New York: P. Lang, 13.

²⁸ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, p. 173.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Apple, M. W., & Apple, M. W. (2012). *Knowledge, power, and education: The selected works of Michael W. Apple*. New York, NY: Routledge, 47..

losing side. In legitimizing only certain forms of knowledge, schools legitimate certain gender, class, and racial interests while negating others.³¹

In the context of classroom teaching, schools have the capacity to construct three forms of knowledge: technical, practical, and emancipatory. Technical knowledge is based on quantifying and measuring knowledge, such as in science and mathematics, through empirical and quantitative analytical methods (e.g., standardized test scores).

The second type of knowledge, practical knowledge, illuminates a student's historical understanding of human and social interactions. This type of knowledge can typically be seen in liberal arts education and disciplines (e.g., history, sociology). The relevant analytical methods would include qualitative research and methodologies (e.g., ethnographic field work).³²

While both of these forms of knowledge are useful for creating a holistic learning experience, the critical educator is most interested in a third form of knowledge: emancipatory knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge specifically aims to help students understand how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by power and privilege. Without emancipatory knowledge, disadvantaged students are not equipped with the critical and political consciousness to understand the realities of the urban condition. This type does not necessarily stand in opposition to technical and practical knowledge, though. However, if inner-city students should become social agents in the classroom through critical pedagogy, then emancipatory knowledge is just as necessary to their learning experience as technical and practical knowledge, for it creates the foundation for student empowerment.³³

³¹ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 170.

³² Ibid.

³³ Apple, M. W., & Apple, M. W. (2012). *Knowledge, power, and education: The selected works of Michael W. Apple*. New York, NY: Routledge, 53.

All of these theoretical foundations establish the premise that public education is more than just an academic setting. Schools reflect the greater contestation of class, culture, power, and knowledge within society. This plays a huge role in the conflict low-income students face when trying to succeed within inner-city schools, for the culture and knowledge they bring do not align with the standard values in formal education. However, critical pedagogy presents an opportunity for inner-city students to identify this within the classroom and use this knowledge to address the greater social and economic conditions they face.

Section Three: Schools as Sites of Cultural & Social Reproduction

“Urban schools are not broken; they are doing exactly what they are designed to do.”
- Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*

Not only do critical pedagogues argue that schools are representative the greater power relations in society, but they also contend that schools merely reproduce the inequalities and social hierarchy in place. Using the theory of social reproduction, this section provides a more focused description of how class and culture intersect in schools to produce inequitable outcomes for public school students.

The School as a Cultural and Political Enterprise

Critical pedagogues identify the school as an arena of cultural politics. This definition is particularly useful for the aims of critical pedagogy; before a school can be seen as a site of social transformation and empowerment, it must first be understood as a site of power contestation between opposing social groups.³⁴

³⁴ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 134.

The argument that schools have historically been used to socialize the youth into the dominant culture is not a unique claim to critical pedagogues alone. Many scholars in the field of sociology have argued that the school is more than just an institution of academic learning. Yet, what makes this frame particularly useful in critical education discourse is that it emphasizes the role schools play in reinforcing the dominant culture's power.³⁵

To be more specific, in inner-city schools, students enter classrooms with a racial and/or cultural identity they have adopted from their urban communities. For instance, many inner-city black youth embrace what mainstream society would consider a "street" persona, an identity that does not completely align with middle and upper-class definitions of an American. Since schools partially function as a socializing mechanism, inner-city students receive messages that their chosen identities are not an appropriate fit for mainstream America. When these schools ignore or negate the value of the students' urban identity, a clash of cultures then emerges.³⁶ Inner-city students are faced with the false binary to either assimilate into the mainstream American and achieve academic success, or retain their urban identity and become society's outsiders. This form of cultural politics contributes to the dysfunction within urban schools and will later explain why the phenomenon of student resistance often occurs in inner-city classrooms; many students choose to participate in the oppositional culture and reject the American socialization process.³⁷

Defining Social Reproduction

Critical educational theorists have long explored how schools perpetuate *social reproduction*, which is defined as "the reproduction of social relationships and attitudes that

³⁵ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 186.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Boren, M. E. (2001). *Student resistance: A history of the unruly subject*. New York: Routledge, 14.

maintain the existing class relations and economic hierarchy of the larger society.”³⁸ Social reproduction theory examines how schools can prematurely organize students into occupational classes and further perpetuate inequalities. Some examples of these socially reproductive mechanisms include: the allocation of students into private or public schools (and the determinants of this structural allocation), the socioeconomic demographics of individual schools, and the placement of students into curriculum tracks.³⁹

This field of thought is largely inspired by the works of German philosopher Karl Marx and his theory of economic determinism, which describes social and political institutions as structural reinforcements of economic and class interests. However, critical education theorists contend social reproduction is more than simply a case of reproducing socioeconomic status. Critical pedagogues particularly highlight the importance of social, cultural, and linguistic factors.⁴⁰

While the effect is always the intergenerational reproduction of social class (i.e., working-class students become working-class adults, middle-class students become middle-class adults, and upper-class students become upper-class adults), the forces behind social reproduction may manifest in various forms. In addition, school administrators, teachers, and even students themselves are all capable of contributing to the process of social reproduction.

There is a mix of both theoretically-based works and critical ethnographies of schools to demonstrate these reproductive forces in classrooms. Jean Anyon (1980) conducted one of the original research analyses of social reproduction in American classrooms. Her work illuminated the differentiation in pedagogical practices among schools of different classes. According to her

³⁸ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 186.

³⁹ Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162.

⁴⁰ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 171.

research, “working-class schools” instructed students to “follow steps of a procedure.” Rather than being rewarded for taking individual freedoms in their education, students were only taught to respect authority and conform to obedience. Lower-class students were also denied opportunity for critical thinking in the learning process; teachers simply handed them assignments with little explanation to their relevance or influence in bettering their educational outcomes.

Since not much value or meaning was placed in their schoolwork, lower-class students then viewed education as a mundane routine of rules and regulations rather than as a sincere route of learning.⁴¹ In this case, the socially reproductive forces were the pedagogical practices that failed to: 1) intellectually stimulate the students so they could achieve academic growth, 2) motivate them with the ambition to further pursue their education, and 3) equip them with the skills necessary to attend higher education and become more competitive in the job marketplace.

It is important to note, however, that few recent studies on social reproduction in American classrooms have been published to confirm Anyon’s original research findings that the differentiation in instructional practices in schools is largely correlated to the socioeconomic demographics of the student population.

Social and Cultural Capital

Similar to social reproduction, cultural reproduction is an inequality-producing process that functions on class-based differences in cultural capital, which is defined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as the general background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed on from one generation to another.⁴² Economically privileged students inherit substantially different cultural capital from their families and neighborhoods than disadvantaged

⁴¹ Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, 162.

⁴² Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage, 37.

students, but schools tend to only reward those who exhibit the capital of the middle and upper class. Schools then systematically depreciate the cultural capital of students who occupy subordinate class positions.

For example, linguistic competency is one common form of cultural capital that critical theorists argue is generally rewarded to students who exhibit the middle and upper-class linguistic codes. On the other hand, schools will devalue students who use “street” coded speech, which is spoken predominantly by low-income and minority youth. If inner-city students do not master upper-class speech or gain access to other forms of their cultural capital (e.g., social and professional networks), they are unable to properly navigate the educational system and achieve academic and professional success.

Student Resistance

Another case of social reproduction appears through the phenomenon of student resistance, and this theory further questions the processes by which the school system sustains the inequalities found in a class and race-divided society. As stated earlier, schools attempt to socialize a student by instituting cultural values characteristic of mainstream society. However, if students recognize this, they may respond with adverse behaviors.

One major contribution to resistance theory was made by Jay MacLeod (2009) and his field study of low-income students who engaged in classroom episodes of student resistance. He found that through their own oppositional culture of rebellion, inner-city students often implicated themselves even further in their own subordinate positions. More specifically, the students he encountered held negative perceptions and attitudes of their schools and viewed them as discouraging of upward mobility. Students believed they were being “whitewashed” and claimed they were taught that they were nothing more than society’s outsiders. Resenting the

schooling agenda, the students dropped out and turned to low-wage positions or drug-dealing for income. However, by rejecting schooling, these students only became further trapped in their lower social status, helping to perpetuate the status quo of inequality.⁴³

MacLeod's findings also established a link between students' personal aspirations and social reproduction. If students assessed opportunity and acceptance within their school, they were more likely to actively pursue their education. However, if they did not see the school as socially mobile or culturally inclusive, they became frustrated with their inability to realize their academic ambitions while also maintaining their sense of identity.⁴⁴

Paradoxically, schools both reinforce the culture of the dominant class and incite a backlash of resistance and oppositional culture. In spite of their differences, these social dynamics nonetheless produce the same effect in maintaining the status quo. Whether an inner-city student chooses to accept or reject urban schooling, the chances for social mobility remain slim. If they stay within the system, the pedagogical practices only prepare for them for lower-class positions in the job marketplace; instruction promotes discipline and obedience to behavioral rules rather than encouraging creative and intellectual stimulation. Yet, if students prematurely leave the educational system, the only occupations available for them are of the lower and working class.

In sum, socially reproductive processes manifest through the school culture, curricula, classroom procedure, pedagogical practices, and other facets of the schooling process. They collectively reflect an ideological organization of lower-class students into social positions, restricting them from opportunities of upward social mobility. If inner-city students only have

⁴³ MacLeod, Jay. 2009 (3rd ed). *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 47.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

access to the lower class status, then school is no longer a place for fulfilling the American dream; rather, it is a hub for maintaining the status quo.

Social reproduction theory also demonstrates that culture is just as integral to reproducing inequality in schools as material wealth, for it functions on class-based differences in both economic *and* cultural capital. Thus, in order for educational opportunity and social mobility to become a reality for inner-city students, teachers must counter classroom procedures that is discouraging of students' cultural identities or that requires the very capital to which these students have little legitimate access. Without a change in urban pedagogical practices and classroom cultures, inner-city students will continue to remain marginalized in subordinated positions.

Section Four: The Ideals of Critical Pedagogy

"If we have been made, then we can be 'unmade' and 'made over.'"
– Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools*

The Objective

The task at hand then for critical pedagogues has been to challenge and undo the reproductive role schools play in political and cultural life. In doing so, social mobility will become a greater reality in urban settings, and the American public education system will draw closer towards becoming an institution of social change.

The key to grasping critical education theory requires an understanding of its dual purpose; critical pedagogy not only illuminates the social contradictions within American society but it also utilizes this understanding to inform new possibilities. It fuses two seemingly irreconcilable ideas of education as both the problem and the solution. Can schools be sites of both social conflict and social change? Unlike the traditional Marxist view of schools, which

depicts the institution as a fixed structure in reproducing class relations, critical pedagogues argue schools have the capacity to counter the status quo. In spite of urban schools' current role in legitimizing class disparities, they can nonetheless function as a means of empowering students around issues of social justice.⁴⁵

The promise of critical pedagogy then is its hope that critical teachers would not only be providing students with the skills necessary for becoming successful students, but that they also should aim for students to become political agents of change. In this sense, critical pedagogy is radically humanistic; it situates pedagogical practices in schools' civic responsibility to be intolerant of student marginalization.⁴⁶

Critical pedagogy's fundamental goal is to "empower the powerless" and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. In American public schools, the powerless are the inner-city students; economically, they occupy the lowest social status and socio-culturally, many do not possess the necessary capital for upward mobility. Therefore, in inner-city schools, students of disadvantaged backgrounds would serve best under a critical education; it would give them agency in the classroom while also enlightening them on the injustices they inhabit on a daily basis.

The objectives of critical pedagogy can be analyzed at both a macro- and micro-level. Critical pedagogy's macro objective is to connect the student's learning experience to the greater social conflict. In developing critical literacy, students should acquire newly constructed knowledge, world views, and political perspectives. Yet, in order to develop this critical

⁴⁵ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, 160.

⁴⁶ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 27.

consciousness, the students' educational process must be self-initiated. Their socialization should be a self-guided process rather than the traditional method of cultural programming. Critical pedagogues believe students need to uncover the connections among curriculum objectives, cultural norms, and the structural relationships of wider society. Unpacking these connections fosters inquiry among inner-city students into the underlying political, social, and economic foundations of American society.⁴⁷

Micro-objectives relate to the specific content of course curricula, which should be a mediating process between teacher and student. Overall, classroom objectives should be directly tied to the problems and needs of the students themselves. When students share their own life experiences in the classroom, the value of their knowledge becomes appreciated. Students should use their own cultural grammar to articulate the experiences that shape their sociocultural context.⁴⁸

Furthermore, since student experience is intimately related to identity formation, if at-risk students' life experiences can be positively incorporated into the classroom agenda, students are more likely to develop a positive self-concept. Classrooms become safe and conducive spaces for academic growth, personal maturation, and positive identity development.⁴⁹

The Approach

Although there are many popular writers of critical pedagogical thought, the most well-known founder is Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his infamous work "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Freire calls for teachers to overcome the traditional approach of simply "banking"

⁴⁷ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, p. 168

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 228-229.

information into students as if they were passive objects.⁵⁰ Students should be active in their learning experience and engage in a mutually beneficial teacher-student relationship, where knowledge is equally shared. Moreover, one of Freire's most critical contributions was the idea that the content of one's education should serve as a practice of individual freedom. Teachers should awaken students' *critical consciousness*, a process in which students see themselves as active beings fully immersed in the social, political, and cultural formations of their future society.

To be more specific, critical pedagogy encompasses a three-step approach: 1) pedagogical negativism, 2) student judgment, and 3) student affirmation. Through pedagogical negativism, teachers are encouraging students to both question and recognize the forms of power controlling their social lives. Students should then make their own informed judgments about these power relations, and their experiences should be affirmed and validated by the teachers.⁵¹

Achieving these steps requires a classroom approach Michelle Fine calls "naming." Naming involves defining the social and economic relationships that affect students' personal lives, as well as identifying the racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions in wider society. Naming allows students to draw from their own cultural histories and neighborhood experiences to discuss how they've seen and experienced social injustice. Peter McLaren, a leading writer of critical pedagogy, details this classroom technique:

"I could have asked Duke, Buddy, and T.J., for instance, to interview members of the community, beginning with their parents, and to develop an oral history of the area. We could have documented grievances, discussed reasons why people in the area were suffering and analyzed their oppression. We might then have raised these issues with local agencies, providing at least a beginning step in linking self-empowerment and social change."⁵²

⁵⁰ Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 11.

⁵¹ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, p. 233

⁵² Ibid

Through critical pedagogy, learning then becomes an authentically lived and ubiquitous experience, for students are able to connect forms of knowledge from the outside world to inside of the classroom.

Critical Pedagogy: A Cure for Student Resistance?

Lack of classroom engagement is one of the key reasons why many inner-city students reject schooling and drop out of high school. Critical pedagogy presents itself as a possible remedy since it enables students to have a dynamic and relevant role in the learning process. Student agency is activated through student voice, which then becomes a powerful force in legitimizing urban youth's identities and confidence in the schooling system.⁵³

However, critical pedagogy does not guarantee that student resistance will not take place. Nonetheless, it provides teachers with the foundations for understanding resistance when it does occur. Critical pedagogy teaches instructors to be sensitive to the socio-cultural conditions surrounding resistance, for teachers cannot properly serve inner-city students if they carry presumptions of them as lazy, unmotivated, defiant, or culturally deficient. Critical pedagogy is a pathway for teachers to connect to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural structures that impede student development.⁵⁴

Yet, even if one agrees with the philosophical components of critical pedagogy, one question still remains: what does this really mean for the inner-city American student? How does one translate the abstract ideals of critical consciousness, freedom, and liberation into the daily classroom experiences of a student residing in the inner-city neighborhoods of Detroit? How do such goals even become practically relevant or meaningful for these students? Although critical

⁵³ Apple, M. W. (2012). *Knowledge, power, and education: The selected works of Michael W. Apple*. New York, NY: Routledge, 38.

⁵⁴ McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Longman Inc., New York, p. 93

pedagogy is useful for reassessing the purpose of teaching and defining social justice, applying it to the real-world context of urban classrooms has become a separate matter of complexity. This is where culturally relevant pedagogy steps into the picture frame; it takes critical pedagogy one step further to more descriptively integrate students' cultural experiences and identities in the content, methodology, and structure of their learning experiences.

Section Five: The Mis-Education of the African-American Student

"The chief reason why so many give such a little attention to the background of the Negro is the belief that this study is unimportant."

- Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro*

While critical pedagogy takes into account the intersection of class and culture in education, it does not explicitly mention the relevance of race in schools and the socialization process. This is surprising considering the intersection of class and race can easily be observed in American public classrooms; inner-city schools, particularly those in the Northeast and Midwest, are predominated by racial minorities.⁵⁵ Therefore, critical pedagogy in urban education cannot be fully effective if it does not recognize the racial context of urban education and its contributions to social reproduction.

To illustrate the significance of race in urban education, this section will specifically explore the educational history of African American students; this racial group has had a deep-rooted history of being systematically denied a fair and just education, especially one that is both racially and culturally inclusive. Understanding the *miseducation* of African American students adds a new layer to critical education discourse by addressing the denial and ignorance of students' racial backgrounds in classrooms. Since race has historically been used as a tool of oppression in American public education, acknowledging and affirming racial identities will play

⁵⁵ Morrell, E. (2008). The art of critical pedagogy, 44.

an integral role in the success of critical pedagogy. This opens the possibility for critical pedagogy to be anchored in racial and cultural identity and to become *culturally relevant pedagogy*.

The Invisible Norm of Eurocentricity

The invisible norm of Eurocentric education has been lingering in American classrooms since the beginning of the public school system.⁵⁶ This norm has become so pervasive and dominant in public classrooms that it is nearly impossible to detect. It is normal for young elementary school students to learn the history of their Founding Fathers, the Pilgrims, or Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. These are, of course, true and important moments in American history and should be taught to young Americans.

However, the problem arises when this is the only vision of history that is taught to students of color. Black students do not see themselves in white American figures the same way their white counterparts do. When the white man's victory is the only tale in history told to students of color, how then should they perceive themselves? African American students learn of their history in isolated, disintegrated forms. With Black History Month, their history is celebrated once for the entire year, but apart from the occasional celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr., African Americans are told their history is dominated by slavery and racism in the United States. Moreover, there may be one section in the chapter of a history textbook specifically devoted to black history, but this is commonly separated from the elaborated tales of

⁵⁶ Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

American liberty and freedom. The image of black history is largely painted in colors of oppression and inferiority.⁵⁷

The origin of Eurocentric education reaches as far back as the very beginning of the “universal school system” established in America during the late 19th century. Even when the first school systems for blacks were established during the early 20th century, the education of the black American *for* the black American has never been on the forefront of the American education and socialization agenda.⁵⁸

In the early 20th century, African Americans had little voice in sharing their own history, except for the singular cases of recovered journals from former enslaved persons or the works by African American intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. During the Jim Crow era, blacks were able to gain more administrative control over their schools, but resources were not available for them to learn of black history, yet alone teach it. Lessons of the ancient African kingdoms or the contributions of black slaves to American culture were either nonexistent or could not be sufficiently supported by scholarly books.⁵⁹

Since the publication of *The Miseducation of the Negro*, there have been great strides in teaching African American history in classrooms. Modern-day textbooks now incorporate more detail into blacks’ political, social, and cultural contributions to American history. In addition, many new public charter schools in urban districts carry an Afrocentric theme that focuses on empowering black students around their culture and history. However, a lack of positive black history still remains in many neighborhood public high schools.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Woodson, C. G. (1990). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 3-14.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Asante, M. K., & Mattson, M. T. (2001). *The historical and cultural atlas of African Americans*. New York: Macmillan, 18.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

The Miseducation Effect

This miseducation further marginalizes African American students by implying they have no history or it is not a matter of importance, relevance, or legitimacy. The negative depictions of blacks in history also fault them for their current circumstance; since they have consistently been on the losing side of history, their cultural deficiencies and pathologies have only created these educational disparities. The African American student is then taught to pity, shame, or despise their own race.⁶¹

There are several responses black students may have to this hidden curriculum. On the one hand, some students may resist this form of miseducation. They become disillusioned with the prospects of success in the current system and “check out” of mainstream American education. From disruptive classroom behaviors to dropping out of school, this oppositional culture can be seen as “opting out” of the educational process.⁶²

On the other hand, black students can also respond by swallowing their miseducation and foregoing any sense of racial pride. They may feed into the belief that they should not focus on their own history and that it is a less rewarding option for them to proudly associate with their race.⁶³

This depreciation of black history can also hinder students’ development of a positive racial and cultural identity. For instance, when a child learns of his father’s successes, it is natural for him to feel proud of both his father and himself. However, if a child learns that his father has had more failures, it is more likely the child would want to distance himself from the

⁶¹ Woodson, C. G. (1990). *The mis-education of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 3-14.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Asante, M. K., & Mattson, M. T. (1991). *The historical and cultural atlas of African Americans*. New York: Macmillan, 33.

history of his family. Similarly, if students of color receive messages of an inferior history, they are likely to negate or repress these dimensions of their identity.⁶⁴

Cultural pride is also inextricably linked to political consciousness. If black students can become more personally connected to their racial history, they will develop a greater intrinsic motivation to address racial tensions in American society. Racial and cultural identity can also be the means for students to become social agents; they will have sincere interest in transforming racial inequities if they can first positively identify themselves as members of the racial group. Therefore, if inner-city black students are proud of who they are and where they come from, they will be more driven to see positive change in their historically underprivileged communities.⁶⁵

Afrocentricism & Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Afrocentricism presents one possible solution to the devaluation of the black identity in public schools. Afrocentric education grounds its foundation on teaching students African symbols, cultures, and values. It also enables African American students to cherish and take ownership of their own history.⁶⁶

Critics have argued that an Afrocentric education is anti-white or anti-American, which is simply untrue. Afrocentricism does not serve to diminish or dismantle all forms of a Eurocentric education system. Rather, it seeks to empower the African American student by reasserting their history and cultural autonomy.⁶⁷

While they share similar principles, Afrocentric education and culturally relevant pedagogy are not one in the same. In fact, culturally relevant pedagogy is not Afrocentric.

⁶⁴ Asante, M. K., & Mattson, M. T. (1991). *The historical and cultural atlas of African Americans*. New York: Macmillan, 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 7.

⁶⁷ Asante, M. K., & Mattson, M. T. (1991). *The historical and cultural atlas of African Americans*. New York: Macmillan, 34.

Afrocentricism prefers to emphasize African traditions and values. While this approach certainly recognizes the deep history of the African Diaspora, it still does not address the immediate question of the loss of cultural currency blacks face in modern-day classrooms. Culturally relevant pedagogy directly targets the present, cultural context for black students. It ideally serves to encourage African Americans to value their history, both past and present.⁶⁸

However, critics have argued that such an approach does nothing more than over-racialize the issue of education.⁶⁹ Yet, one cannot dissolve the destructive meaning of race in American history without first acknowledging its power. Furthermore, culturally relevant instruction does not encourage black students to entirely disassociate from mainstream American curriculum. Rather, it aims to embrace black students' *cultural pluralism*, to show them that they can be productive members of mainstream American society while still embracing their black identities.

Culturally relevant pedagogy's main purpose is for teachers to recognize that appropriately acknowledging students' race can be an effective pedagogical practice. It fosters learning as a culturally inclusive process and encourages minority students to see their identities as a positive tool in their own education and social agency.

Section Six - Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Making Critical Education Work in Urban Schools

"While youth will need to learn about world history, and while they will need to be exposed to the literary canon, they can learn most of the core academic skills that they need by engaging their own social worlds."

- Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*

⁶⁸ Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R., & Morrell, E. (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. New York: Peter Lang, 19-24.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

This section explores how critical pedagogy can be applied in real urban classrooms, particularly those occupied by minority students. By incorporating racial identity into the critical pedagogical approach, students are able to draw upon the systemic racial issues in both their personal lives and communities to engage in classroom learning. This section explores how culturally relevant pedagogy can be modeled in inner-city classrooms through project-based learning and critical research. Through this method, students are able to personally connect with their education and develop the critical literacy to understand the social injustices within their communities.

Culturally Relevant Instruction: An Additive Model

Many urban schools harbor culturally exclusive practices; urban students are asked, either implicitly or explicitly, to exchange the culture of their home and community for the higher culture of the school. This approach to schooling often reduces the life choices for non-white youth into a false binary: they must decide between retaining their urban identities and becoming an academic failure or “escaping the hood” to achieve success.⁷⁰

Alternatively, an *additive model* of education would focus on designing urban pedagogy that identifies inner-city students’ cultures and communities as assets . This approach breaks the cycle of disinvestment in urban communities; it inspires inner-city students to recognize their potential agency in improving their communities rather than seeing them as places to escape. This method of instruction provides urban youth a renewed sense of purpose in school, and it

⁷⁰ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 22.

offers the community the necessary actors to contribute to its social, economic, and political revitalization.⁷¹

Critical Praxis

Culturally relevant pedagogy employs the five steps in *critical praxis*; originally termed by critical pedagogues, this process allows teachers and students to commit to an education that leads to action and reflection.⁷² This process has five stages:

1. Identify a problem.
2. Analyze the problem.
3. Create a plan of action to address the problem.
4. Implement the plan of action.
5. Analyze and evaluate the action.

Through this process of critical reflection, urban students are not only developing the academic competencies of problem-solving skills, they are also engaging in a cycle of critical reflection on the very issues they face within their urban communities. Critical praxis breaks down the inherent power relations in traditional instruction and recognizes students as collaborators with their teachers. It repositions students as actors and contributors.⁷³

There have been several documented cases in implementing this approach to critically engage poor and urban students. While this paper is not necessarily an implementation guide, but a more philosophical paper in nature, it is still useful to translate the abstract and ideological notions of critical pedagogy into real-life practice in urban classrooms.

⁷¹ Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

⁷² Morrell, E. (2008). The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools, 17.

⁷³ Ibid.

Case Study

The second portion of this section examines one specific example of culturally relevant pedagogy with *youth participatory action research*, a process where urban youth conduct a collective investigation of a pressing social conflict. In this example, critical pedagogy author Ernest Morrell led a cohort of young students in Oakland, California to become critical action researchers within their own communities. The outcomes of their research both enhanced their academic skill development and passion for social and educational justice. The following description will also illustrate how these projects employed the five steps of critical praxis.⁷⁴

Identify the Problem

The project sought to answer the following questions: What does every student in California deserve? What inequalities arise in the experiences of California's students? Why do these inequalities arise? How can youth use research to play a part in legal advocacy?⁷⁵

Analyze the Problem

The students were divided into research teams, and each team utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods to research the student learning experience in Los Angeles-area schools. The students used audiotape recordings, video and still digital photography, and interviews with educational researchers, community organizers, school administrators, civil rights attorneys, and elected officials. Students also examined statistical databases and researched other historical artifacts such as yearbooks, newspaper articles, and photographs. Through these research methods, the students were able to collect meaningful data that articulated a narrative of schooling for students of color in the city.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Morrell, E. (2008). The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools, 105-151.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Create and Implement a Plan of Action

Student research teams then produced PowerPoint presentations and reports that presented their research findings, which included policy recommendations for urban public schools. The students then presented their proposals to university faculty, local and state politicians, teachers, community members, and parents on how to better improve the experiences of students of color in Los Angeles.⁷⁷

Analyze and Evaluate

After the first year of this project, students returned to their original research questions and decided to conduct another oral history of the area. Through critical reflection, the youth were able to further develop their research and address unanswered questions relating to educational equity and access in the city.

Through this project, the high school students were able to reposition themselves in relationship to their own histories, and they were able to share valuable information with community organizations, parents, peers, and policymakers who were all actively involved in fighting for educational, social, and racial justice in their city. Moreover, what differentiated this project from other traditional modes of student research in classrooms was that it involved collective action and made the *city* the context for learning.⁷⁸

Therefore, to implement critical pedagogy in urban contexts, it is vital that educators identify the curriculum that is intriguing enough to generate student engagement and relevant enough to warrant student participation. It should answer the question, “Why is this important to me, my future life, and the future of my community?”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Morrell, E. (2008). The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools, 105-151.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

This also means that developing a culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy should address the material concerns of students and their communities (e.g., education, housing, justice, jobs), and it should encourage students to use what they are learning to act upon these social and economic concerns. In addition, although this example draws primarily from social science research, culturally relevant pedagogy can manifest in other forms and cuts across several subjects and areas.⁸⁰ This example is just particularly poignant in illustrating the social justice component of culturally relevant pedagogy.

This example also illustrates that culturally relevant pedagogy does not have to exclude other conventional modes of instruction and curriculum. Teachers are not faced with the false binary of choosing between a classic curriculum and a curriculum focused on the lived experiences of the students. Rather, culturally relevant pedagogy can be both; its instruction builds on the knowledge students bring into the classroom and uses it to enhance their academic potential.

Section Seven: Challenges to Realizing Critical Pedagogy in Urban Education

Although critical and culturally relevant pedagogy present possible tools for transforming the quality of urban education, the theory's abstract and humanistic ideals will confront serious challenges in practice. If critical pedagogues believe teachers are to play a role in developing students' critical literacy, the teacher must then possess a sufficient level of competency and effectiveness in student instruction. However, the current state of affairs in urban schools, and the public education system more generally, show several structural and organizational barriers to teacher effectiveness in America. These obstacles must be thoroughly addressed in order for critical pedagogy to be effectively implemented in urban classrooms.

⁸⁰ Morrell, E. (2008). The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools.

The current research data on the urban teaching workforce reveals that many teachers are not yet fully capable of being critical educators, for a high percentage of them are novice teachers and inexperienced in teaching at-risk students. Moreover, the high rates of teacher turnover in urban schools, especially among minority teachers, illustrate another organizational challenge: sustaining a stable school environment. One significant contributing factor behind high turnover rates is the frustration among teachers, both white and non-white, with inner-city schools' working conditions. More specifically, they are discouraged by the lack of individual autonomy in directing their classrooms.⁸¹

If urban teachers are to fulfill their role as social agents, new policy measures must ensure these teachers are both properly qualified and prepared to teach inner-city students. Urban schools must also improve their working conditions and have a culture that is both stable and conducive for critical education.

Urban Teachers: Growing Younger and Less Experienced

Over the past few decades, the demographics of the American teaching force have significantly changed. Although these shifts cut across several dimensions, ranging from gender to race, age, experience, and other teaching factors, this section will specifically explore the most relevant changes in urban schools that will challenge the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Arguably the most problematic transformation in the teaching workforce is the growing number of younger and less-experienced teachers. While recent research reports have shown that the number of teachers has significantly increased, this influx of is not a direct indicator of a rise

⁸¹ Ingersoll, R. (2013). *Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force*. Retrieved from The Consortium for Policy Research in Education website: <http://cppe.org/seven-trends-transformation-teaching-force-0>

in qualified or experienced instructors. In fact, this rise is partially attributed to the growth in new hires; recent college graduates, as well as middle-aged persons who make a mid-career switch to teaching, are driving the expansion of the teaching workforce.⁸²

However, research has shown that newly hired teachers experience great difficulty in instruction when they first enter the profession; it takes a minimum of three years for novice teachers to attain a proficient level in instruction. Moreover, before they can become critical pedagogues, novice teachers must have the maturity to understand each individual student's academic and emotional needs, as well as have the critical awareness that these needs connect to greater social issues the youth face in their communities. However, not only are inexperienced teachers less likely to produce academic achievement among students, but they are also less likely to possess other necessary qualities of effective teaching, such as handling behavioral problems.⁸³

Since inner-city schools are known to have a climate of disruptive behaviors and violence, the challenge for newly hired teachers is prominent. If the number of inexperienced teachers continues to rise and dominate the teaching workforce, this presents serious challenges to the realization of culturally relevant pedagogy. Critical educational theory demands teachers to have both the intellectual competency and instructional capability of integrating students' personal and social experiences into classroom learning. It requires teachers to have an acute awareness of their students' personal backgrounds.

All of these skills are key for empowering inner-city students around issues of social justice in the classroom. Anchoring critical pedagogy in racial and cultural identity entails a significant level of maturity, professionalism, and empathy. These qualities are highly useful for

⁸² Ingersoll, R. (2013). *Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force*.

⁸³ Ibid.

working with at-risk, low-income, and minority youth. Unfortunately, the majority of novice teachers have not yet reached a quality level of instruction, or attained the proper skill sets, to critically engage inner-city students to be agents in the classroom.

There is one silver lining, though, in the recent research report; the expansion of the teaching workforce is also partially attributed to the increase in veteran teachers. While the growth of younger and inexperienced teachers is outpacing the growth of veteran teachers, there is still opportunity for veterans to play an integral role in improving the efficacy of new hires. Research has shown that when veterans mentor novice teachers, they increase their capacity to promote academic achievement. If more veteran teachers were to stay in inner-city schools, professional development programs should ensure mentorships and mutually beneficial relationships are established between veteran and novice instructors so they can be ready to handle the demands of urban and culturally relevant instruction.

Teacher Turnover

However, the rise of younger and less-experienced teachers is not the only potential conflict to promoting critical pedagogy. High teacher turnover rates in inner-city schools pose a serious challenge to the stability of school environments and the opportunity to foster a culture of critical learning.

Two statistics are particularly telling of the current teacher staffing crisis in urban schools. First, novice teachers have the highest turnover rates of any group of teachers. Second, around one quarter of public schools are contributing to nearly half of the public teacher turnover, and the concentration of this turnover is located in mostly high-poverty and high-minority schools. Moreover, recent research shows that teachers who are leaving low-income

and inner-city schools are not necessarily quitting the teaching profession; rather, a good percentage of them are leaving to teach at wealthier and whiter school.⁸⁴

This high level of attrition among novice teachers, especially in inner-city schools, contributes to the low level of teacher quality in urban school districts. When novice teachers leave to teach in privileged schools, they create the job openings for other less-experienced teachers to take their place. This only perpetuates a dangerous cycle of under-developed teachers continuously occupying inner-city classrooms.⁸⁵

In addition, minority teachers in inner-city schools are experiencing relatively higher levels of teacher turnover than their white counterparts. This statistic is particularly interesting considering the fact that the teaching workforce has diversified in recent decades, and recruitment efforts to increase the number of minority teachers in inner-city schools has had some degree of success; more minority teachers are employed in under-resourced schools now than ever before. However, in spite of the increase in minority teachers serving at-risk and disadvantaged student populations, many of these teachers soon leave.⁸⁶

Why are both novice and minority teachers leaving inner-city schools? These teachers primarily attribute their departure to the unsatisfying school working conditions, claiming that high-poverty and high-minority schools do not give them the individual autonomy to make critical decisions concerning their teaching responsibilities. While there are certainly other contributing factors, the primary determinant is administrative control and the ability of instructors to use their own discretion in the curriculum and classroom learning process.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ingersoll, R. (2013). *Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force*.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ingersoll, R., & May, H. (2011, September). The minority teacher shortage: fact or fable? *Kappan Magazine*, 62-65. Retrieved from http://www.gse.upenn.edu/pdf/rmi/Fact_or_Fable.pdf

⁸⁷ Ibid.

In conjunction with the influx of novice and inexperienced teachers, if high turnover rates continue to affect inner-city schools, teacher quality will pose a serious challenge to realizing culturally relevant pedagogy. The cycle of novice teachers both entering and leaving inner-city classrooms creates instability in school environments and impedes teachers' professional development.

Teacher retention must be seriously addressed in inner-city schools, for long-term teacher-student relationships have been shown to be positively influential in student outcomes. The lack of these long-term relationships has also been strongly linked to the minority achievement gap and persistent educational disparities. Moreover, minority teachers can serve as adult role models for minority students who lack contact with teachers who understand their racial and cultural background. It is much easier to implement culturally relevant pedagogy when the teachers are already in tune with students' racial and cultural identities. However, if minority teachers continue to leave at-risk schools, the prospects of realizing culturally relevant pedagogy are dim.⁸⁸

Implications for Policymaking

In order for culturally relevant pedagogy to be effective in urban education, policy measures should better promote teacher effectiveness and address the structural issues surrounding teacher turnover. Professional development programs should allow novice teachers to develop the required competency to effectively teach inner-city students. In addition, while recruitment initiatives have been moderately successful in increasing the number of minority teachers in inner-city schools, new policies should focus on ensuring school administrators sustain the proper working conditions for teachers to have more individual autonomy; this would

⁸⁸ Ingersoll, R., & May, H. (2011, September). The minority teacher shortage: fact or fable? *Kappan Magazine*, 62-65.

decrease the likelihood of teacher frustration and attrition. When schools become nurturing environments for teachers to grow as qualified instructors, these teachers can in turn increase their capacity to critically engage their students through culturally relevant and meaningful material.

Conclusion & Areas of Future Research

This paper set out to investigate the role that critical pedagogy could play in improving student outcomes and experiences in inner-city schools. In this final section, this paper will review the contributions of this analysis and discuss directions for future research.

The paper began by investigating the theoretical foundations of critical pedagogy, demonstrating the foundational roles class and culture play in schools. Change in inner-city schools thus requires a change in these power relations. The paper then further explored the theory of social reproduction, illustrating how schools' cultural and instructional practices reduce low-income students' chances of educational attainment and economic success. These socially reproductive forces can largely be attributed to lack of critical instruction in inner-city classrooms, as well as student' own oppositional responses to the socializing process.

This laid the foundation for critical pedagogy to present itself as a possible solution. Through this approach, urban educators give students voice, critical literacy, and agency in the classroom. However, while critical pedagogy highlights the importance for teachers to empower students around issues of social justice, the theory misses the relevance of race in the context of urban education. Culturally relevant pedagogy then connects the theoretical principles of critical pedagogy with the racial realities of inner-city students. Through culturally relevant curriculum, students can have a renewed sense of purpose in their education. Yet, this cannot be realized if

other structural and organizational barriers in inner-city schools are not also addressed, such as teacher turnover, poor teacher quality, and instable school environments.

The possibilities of critical and culturally relevant pedagogy are still hopeful. They create the opportunity for urban education to become transformative for both students and greater society, for inner-city students would be properly prepared to confront the conditions of social and economic injustice in America.

However, much research still needs to be done on studying the long-term student outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogy. Future research should address the question of whether critical pedagogy can be quantitatively linked to reducing educational disparities, such as standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college attainment. It should also quantitatively examine the effects culturally relevant pedagogy may have in reducing instances of student resistance, including drop-out rates and classroom disruptive behaviors. Moreover, research should also be conducted on how to best execute teacher preparation and training programs for culturally relevant instruction. These studies would inform new ways of effectively implementing culturally relevant pedagogy and understanding its concrete impact on urban disparities.

Overall, the promise of critical pedagogy lies in its potential to make both teachers and students critical social agents. Teachers are able to instill agency in historically marginalized and disenfranchised youth, and in turn, these students can challenge the status quo of inequality facing American cities. Under the guidance of critical pedagogy, the idea of teaching for social justice and for a better America appears promising.

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